



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Bush's AmeriCorps Fraud

by James Bovard

Politicians have long used moral doggerel to make citizens docile. Though President Bush is often verbally inept, he has hit the same chords his predecessors played to sway Americans to glorify government workers as moral icons worthy of gratitude and respect.

Two months after the 9/11 attacks, Bush announced that he was expanding AmeriCorps and that “all of us can become a September the 11th volunteer by making a commitment to service in our own communities.” Bush had long been a fan of AmeriCorps, flaunting his enthusiasm for it during the 2000 presidential campaign as proof of his compassionate conservatism.

AmeriCorps was started by President Clinton in 1993 to hire a legion of people to perform federally designated good deeds. In Mississippi, AmeriCorps members went door to door to recruit people for food stamps. In Buffalo, New York, AmeriCorps members helped run a program that gave children \$5 for each toy gun they brought in. In Southern California, AmeriCorps members busied themselves foisting unreliable, ultra-low-flush toilets on poor people. In San Diego, AmeriCorps recruits carried out an undergarment drive to collect used bras and pantyhose for a local women's center.

At the time Bush took office, many conservatives viewed AmeriCorps as incorrigible and demanded its abolition. Bush was far more interested in politically exploiting the program to showcase his own benevolence.

For their 1,700 hours of service, AmeriCorps members receive roughly \$16,000 a year in cash and benefits, including a \$4,725 education award that can be used for college costs or paying off college loans. Many AmeriCorps members are unskilled and earn more on the federal payroll than they would in private employment.

Bush hails AmeriCorps members, despite their paychecks, as “volunteers.” The agency refers to its recruits as “stipended volunteers.” The political exploitation of the volunteer label epitomizes the false piety that has always seeped from AmeriCorps.

A legacy of ineffectiveness

In most areas of AmeriCorps activity, its effect is negligible — at best:

- In Louisiana, AmeriCorps members passed out free gun locks at Wal-Mart stores.
- A team of 80 AmeriCorps members spent more than 20,000 hours hoeing corn and doing other tasks at the Garfield Farm Museum outside Geneva, Illinois.
- AmeriCorps member Adrienne Blauser led a campaign to persuade the Idaho Transportation Department to rename parts of two state highways the Sacajawea Historical Byway.
- An AmeriCorps member helped organize a “Pink Prom,” the first gay youth dance in Snohomish County, Washington.
- AmeriCorps members in Worcester, Massachusetts, presented lessons in half a dozen schools about “Super Bowl Surge” — the problems that occur when millions of people watching the big game use the bathroom during half-time. “In one lesson, students were asked to consider what will happen if the New England Patriots football team makes it to the Super Bowl,” the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette* reported.
- In Buffalo, AmeriCorps members busied themselves repairing private lawns damaged by government snow plows.
- In Pueblo, Colorado, an AmeriCorps team spent the first week of March 2004 sifting trash and other material in the basement of a local museum. Ameri-Corps member Jane Howard Crutchfield beamed, “We’re learning a lot of history, just going through and sorting through all the old magazines from the 1940s till now, really.”
- In Knoxville, Tennessee, AmeriCorps members planted a few acres of vegetables to give to soup kitchens and food-distribution centers. The program also involved three cats — Willow, Tiger Lily, and Lotus — to help with rodent control, according to the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Though this project may have filled AmeriCorps members with pride, a harvest the size of theirs could have been procured for poor folks at less cost at the nearest Safeway. These AmeriCorps members are paid more than farm workers, and my own observations of AmeriCorps members and farm workers suggest that farm workers are far more productive.
- AmeriCorps members worked with the Tobacco Free Coalition of Wood County, Wisconsin, calling up local residents to survey their attitudes on secondhand smoke. Local government will use the survey results when it decides whether to ban all smoking in restaurants.
- The Huntington, West Virginia, *Herald-Dispatch* reported that a local AmeriCorps member “set up a ‘March for Meals’ campaign as part of Martin Luther King Jr. week activities. As a result, 207 cans of food collected were “donated” to a local food bank. The cost to taxpayers of the AmeriCorps member’s salary during the food-can drive could easily have exceeded the value

of the food collected (unless it was 207 cans of caviar). The same AmeriCorps member also “led students in coloring pictures to give to children” in a local hospital.

- Puppet shows are a favorite activity for AmeriCorps members. In Springfield, Illinois, Ameri-Corps members presented a puppet show to edify three-year-olds at the Little Angels Child Care Center by alerting them to the benefits of smoke detectors. In Asheville, North Carolina, AmeriCorps members put on a puppet show for kids warning them about the dangers of child abuse.

A congressional favorite

AmeriCorps is popular on Capitol Hill in part because it sometimes provides easy opportunities for members of Congress to flaunt their virtue. After some congressional folks showed up one day in March 2004 to hammer some nails at a Habitat for Humanity house-building project in Washington, D.C., AmeriCorps issued a press release hyping their participation in the good deed. The press release named eight members of Congress and noted, “Working alongside the elected officials were two dozen AmeriCorps members from the D.C. chapter of Habitat for Humanity and AmeriCorps.” The home they helped build was to be given to a single mother of three. Photos from the appearance at the Habitat project could prove helpful for some congressional reelection campaigns.

One of the most important tasks of AmeriCorps members is to be waiting on airport tarmacs when Air Force One arrives and President Bush descends for local fundraisers and other public appearances. Bush routinely mentions AmeriCorps members by name in the subsequent speech. Conservatives harshly criticized President Clinton for using AmeriCorps members as official greeters for his travels. Bush has not been scathed by similar complaints.

Failure fixing failure

AmeriCorps is a government program that supposedly rectifies the failures of other government programs. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, most fourth-grade students in government schools are unable to read proficiently. School and literacy-related activities are the most frequent task for AmeriCorps members — despite the fact that they have no particular competence in these areas, special skills, or training as teachers.

Instead, AmeriCorps pretends that reading to kids is “close enough for government work” to teaching kids how to read. Many AmeriCorps literacy programs are little more than “fun with books” — activities that have as much lasting benefit as watching a few episodes of *Sesame Street*. Ameri-Corps members sometimes appear as “guest readers” in schools. Yet some AmeriCorps members may find even this task a bit daunting. AmeriCorps assistant teachers in Mississippi, for instance, were only required to read at an eighth-grade level. Many AmeriCorps members lack a high-school degree.

Many AmeriCorps education activities have scant impact on learning. AmeriCorps members painted rainbows on the walls of an elementary school library in Pickens, South Carolina. The South Carolina *Greenville News* reported that, among other noteworthy achievements, Ameri-Corps member Kelly Jean Erwin “helped organize an arts closet so a teacher can more easily access materials for her students.”

AmeriCorps’s efforts may be inspired by a “nearness to moral greatness” theory of education — i.e., that mere proximity to an AmeriCorps member will spontaneously generate literacy. Yet even the Bush administration now recognizes that AmeriCorps education activities often flop. President Bush issued an executive order on February 27, 2004, demanding that AmeriCorps activities in schools “employ tutors who meet required paraprofessional qualifications.” This could greatly reduce the number of AmeriCorps classroom interventions. On the other hand, it could work out well for urban beautification programs, since more AmeriCorps members may be shifted to litter pickup (a favorite agency activity to generate positive press coverage).

Though AmeriCorps abounds in “feel good” projects, it has never provided credible evidence of benefit to the United States. The Office of Management and Budget concluded in 2003 that “AmeriCorps has not been able to demonstrate results. Its current focus is on the amount of time a person serves, as opposed to the impact on the community or participants.” OMB noted in 2004, “AmeriCorps accomplishments are difficult to measure, but its reported impact is small.” The General Accounting Office noted in 2000 that AmeriCorps “generally reports the results of its programs and activities by quantifying the amount of services AmeriCorps participants perform.” GAO criticized Ameri-Corps for failing to make any effort to measure the actual effect of its members’ actions.

AmeriCorps has always been grossly mismanaged. It is like a religious miracle that is continually exposed as a fake and a fraud — and yet people continue to make pilgrimages to the site and worship it — or at least to urge Congress to seize and spend other people’s money for site maintenance.

AmeriCorps is the most visible symbol and proof of the hollowness of Bush’s compassionate agenda. It is moral dementia to believe that government can create virtue simply by seizing some people’s paychecks and paying other people to piously wander the land wearing gray T-shirts and hats. AmeriCorps should be abolished ASAP.

James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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